

Advertising & Marketing

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Product placement — you can't escape it

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Robert Reames III, 27, from Lancaster, Pa., sold his neck and chest as ad space. Here a tattoo advertises a Web service.

By Laura Petrecca, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — To hype the fall TV season, CBS plastered pictures of its shows' stars on postage stamps and across the insides of elevator doors. It laser-coated its eye logo on more than 35 million eggs, and carved the name of a new program, *Jericho*, into a 40-acre Kansas cornfield.

CBS (CBS) added those blips to the marketing storm sweeping the nation. Advertising is intruding on more previously untouched corners of life, including novels, hotel shower curtains, school buses and the bellies of pregnant women. Golfer Fred Couples is often followed around the course by a gaggle of woman paid to wear the name Bridgestone Golf, his sponsor.

It's advertising ad nauseam. And it's getting worse.

PHOTOS: [Ads are everywhere](#)

"I've never seen things changing as much as they are now," says Rance Crain, editor-in-chief of trade magazine *Advertising Age* and a 40-plus-year observer of marketing. "Advertisers will not be satisfied until they put their mark on every blade of grass."

Ad-zapping devices — and a decrease in consumer attention spans — have created doubts about the effectiveness of traditional TV, radio and print ads. In response, marketers have become increasingly invasive.

"It's out of control," says Jenny Beaton, a mother of three in Westlake, Ohio. "I don't know how advertisers can think they're selling more products. It's just annoying everybody."

Many, such as Beaton, are tuning out.

"Advertising is so ubiquitous that it's turning people off," Crain says. "It's desensitizing people to the message."

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The more consumers ignore ads, the more ads marketers spew back at them, says Max Kalehoff of marketing research firm Nielsen BuzzMetrics. "It's like a drug addiction. Advertisers just keep buying more and more just to try to achieve prior levels of impact. In other words, they're hooked."

This year, marketers will spend a record \$175 billion on ads in major media, such as TV, radio, print, outdoor, movie theaters and the Internet, says ad-buying firm ZenithOptimedia. That's up 5% over 2005. Add direct mail and other direct-response ads, and the total will hit \$269 billion.

The increase comes from advertisers trying to out-yell each other, says J. Walker Smith, president of the consulting firm Yankelovich. If a marketer feels drowned out, "They just turn up the volume."

Here's how loud it's getting:

- The average 1970s city dweller was exposed to 500 to 2,000 ad messages a day, Smith says. Now, it's 3,000 to 5,000.
- In 2005, MTV ([VIA](#)) viewers had to put up with 21% more prime-time commercials per hour than in 2004, says TNS Media Intelligence and media firm MindShare.
- Marketers shelled out 71% more — \$941 million — to integrate brands into TV shows in 2005 vs. 2004, PQ Media says.
- There are now ad-supported TV screens at airports, gas stations, health clubs and on buses and subways. Wal-Mart has its own network. ABC ([DIS](#)) signed with the In-Store Broadcasting Network to promote TV shows in Kroger supermarkets.
- Spending for on-screen movie theater ads swelled 21% to \$453 million in 2005 vs. 2004. Off-screen ads, such as lobby promotions, rose 18% to \$75 million, according to the Cinema Advertising Council.
- Marketers raised "out-of-home" spending, from billboards to elevator ads, by 9% last year to \$6.3 billion, the Outdoor Advertising Association of America says.

There's more to come. Marketers see small-screen devices — iPods, cellphones, laptops and video games — as the growth frontier:

- Spending for ads on Web-enabled mobile phones is expected to be \$150 million this year, up threefold vs. 2005, according to consulting firm Ovum. By 2009, that will swell 766% to \$1.3 billion.
- In 2005, \$21 million was spent to place products in video games, a 38% rise over 2004, PQ Media says.
- Last year, companies shelled out \$13 billion on Internet classified, search and display ads, JupiterResearch says. That's expected to double to \$26 billion by 2011.

Brain freeze

"The human brain doesn't process things any better than it did 30 years ago. But there are more people competing for that processing time," Yankelovich's Smith says. "It's no surprise that consumers are pushing back."

They've put more than 130 million phone numbers on the federal government's telemarketer-thwarting national Do Not Call Registry as of Sept. 5.

Use of pop-up ad blockers on computers nearly tripled from June 2003 to January 2006, to 71%, according to Arbitron/Edison Media Research provided by eMarketer. Users with spam blockers more than doubled to 73%.

Web gives consumers voice

The Internet has emerged as a soapbox for irate consumers.

After Columbia Pictures ([SNE](#)) said it would cover Major League Baseball bases with *Spider-Man 2* logos in 2004, tens of thousands voted against it in ESPN.com and AOL.com polls. Within 48 hours, the studio called it off, citing the polls.

On a more micro level, football fans watching the Auburn vs. Louisiana State game on Sept. 16 saw CBS serve up Ruby Tuesday ([RI](#)) eatery ads with the computer-generated first down line. Among the post-game comments on an LSU online forum: "It was very distracting. ... Please join me in voicing your displeasure." The posting included Web links to Ruby Tuesday and CBS corporate sites.

"Never before in history have consumers been able to spit back at marketers the way they have now," says BuzzMetric's Kalehoff.

But the onslaught goes on. Driving it, Crain says: "Desperation."

Marketing under pressure

Companies are under more pressure than ever to deliver rosy quarterly results, and top marketing executives have less time than ever to prove their mettle. The average tenure of a chief marketing officer at a major U.S. company has declined to 23.2 months, according to search firm Spencer Stuart.

It's no wonder they'll sign off on increasingly bizarre ideas.

For instance, a recent promotion for the Paramount Pictures film *Jackass: Number Two* appears on urinal mats when the mat is hit with a stream of "number one."

Even conservative Procter & Gamble ([PG](#)) has loosened up. It put print ads for Crest Night Effects whitening gel inside women's restroom stalls — at eye level when the user sits down.

"Marketers are saying, 'We must be more innovative — to zig when others zag,' " says Richard Notarianni, executive

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creative director of media at ad firm Euro RSCG.

"The industry is desperate to find clever ways to reach people, whether or not it has any legitimate value. ... When someone says, 'Let's put advertising in bathroom stalls,' another says 'That's great. It's a captive audience.' "

'Your brand here'

The desperate ad buyers are finding willing co-conspirators.

As more companies, cities, school districts — even individuals — hawk ad space, others feel as if they are leaving money on the table if they don't join in.

"This is about economics," says James Twitchell, consumer culture expert and author of *Branded Nation* and *Adcult USA*.

Elementary and high schools now pipe commercial radio onto buses and TV into classrooms. The Scottsdale Unified School District in Arizona is one of several districts across the USA that has sold ads on the outside of school buses.

Taking a page from the pro-sports arena, schools also hawk naming rights deals for facilities. In Sheboygan, Wis., two high schools just sold sponsorship rights to their cafes to Associated Bank.

In May, Robert Reames III, 27, a father of three girls who was looking for money to replace the family car, sold rights to a permanent tattoo on his neck to Web-hosting company Globat.

The company also bought a temporary tattoo ad on the pregnant belly of Asia Francis, 21, of St. Louis. Globat would not disclose what it has paid for "body art."

No space is too odd. US Airways ([LCC](#)) is in talks to sell ads on airsickness bags, spokeswoman Valerie Wunder says. It already makes about \$10 million a year from ads on tray tables and napkins, she says.

"The game has become one of finding the next blank space that hasn't been covered," says Yankelovich's Smith.

Most marketing executives know they have a problem. Many of the firms that buy ads are the same ones that put out research reports on the dangers of deluging and angering consumers.

"Advertisers love to talk about advertising clutter," Twitchell says. "That's like the doctor shooting a patient up with amphetamines and then saying that the patient is acting really frenetic."

Hoping to get 'engaged'

In its search for salvation, the marketing industry has glommed onto the concept of "engagement" — a quality-over-quantity idea.

The basic theory: Instead of, for example, running dozens of radio ads, create messages that the consumer seeks out, such as an entertaining Web video, and perhaps even passes on to friends.

"Message clutter is not going to go away. If anything, it's going to proliferate," says Mike Donahue, executive vice president, American Association of Advertising Agencies. "If you're looking at 10 messages and two of them really involve you, engage you and connect with you, those ads will be less annoying and a lot more effective."

Andrew Hertz, 39, general manager of Miami Seaquarium, thinks they might be on to something.

"When advertisers make the ads fun and interactive, they're not so bad," he says, citing a Mini Cooper magazine ad that included stickers of fancy wheels and other accessories that consumers could peel off to customize the car on the page.

What Hertz can't stand: ads in his face, including Internet pop-up ads, and paper subscription cards that fall out of magazines. "The thing that annoys me is when advertising is intrusive," he says.

BuzzMetric's Kalehoff says marketers have to stop pitching so hard, fast, loudly and frequently.

Kalehoff says they need to understand — and respond to — gripes from frustrated consumers such as Hertz. Only then will they be able to produce marketing that sells, he says.

"If you want to make friends with your customers, you have to stop hitting them over the head."

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